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## ON AN IDIOMATIC ORDER OF WORDS

In Skeat's edition of Chaucer, verses 3 and 4 of *Troilus*, Bk. II, are printed as follows:

For in this see the boot hath swich travayle,  
Of my conning that unnethe I it stere:

The Globe editor uses the same punctuation within the passage. The comma after *travayle* indicates that the expression of *my conning* is an adverbial phrase limiting *stere*. Skeat himself, however, in his note on this passage, quotes the passage from the *Purgatorio* of which Chaucer's verses are an adaptation, and in which occurs the phrase *la navicella del mio ingegno*. This shows clearly that Chaucer's meaning is 'the boot of my conning,' in which *of my conning* is a phrase limiting *boot*. This is clear also from the fact that otherwise *the boot* would be left dangling in an awkward fashion with no further identification. The meaning is expressed by removing the comma after *travayle* and placing one after *conning*.

Leaving to the reader the boat metaphor with the explanatory hint thus added, Chaucer seems unwilling, however, to trust him to interpret the parallel metaphor of the sea, and accordingly explains in full in the words,—

This see clepe I the tempestous matere  
Of desespeyr that Troilus was inne:<sup>1</sup>

A special reason, however, why the contemporary reader, more readily than the modern reader, would at once catch the meaning, lies in the idiomatic order of words, which, except perhaps occasionally in external appearance, has now become archaic; namely, the separation, especially by the verb of the clause, of a genitive or an *of*-phrase from its governing word. This order is very common elsewhere in Chaucer, being found, for example, five verses before, in Bk. I, 1090:

<sup>1</sup> May it be that *I* stands here in emphatic contrast with *Dante*? and that Chaucer is calling attention to his own application of the *sea* metaphor to *Troilus*' state, different from Dante's application of it, with a hint that after all it was not so far different?

And, as an esy pacient, the lore  
Abit of him that gooth aboute his cure.

So also,

- A 56: at the sege eek hadde he be  
Of Algezir.  
A 343: With-oute bake mete was never his hous  
Of fish or flesh.  
A 1118: The fresshe beautee sleeth me sodeynly  
Of hir that rometh—. *Compl. Mars*, 212:  
The point is this of my destruccioun.

Other examples are: A 134, 301, 477, 942, 2261, 2421, 3105, B 4064, *Anel.* 52, *Troil.* I, 62, II, 617, 1321, IV, 323. Scores of others may be found.

The same word-order is found in the use of the genitive in Old English prose. The following examples from King Alfred are cited from Wülfing's *Syntax*:

- Cp.* 126, 23: Ðat hie æmettigel beoð ðære scire (W. § 3, b).  
*So.* 188, 30: Forðam ic wat swa swa ðu freora byst pissa weorlde þinga, swa — (W. § 3, e).  
*Be.* 541, 39: Ða yþa weollon & weddan ðæs sæs (W. § 47, g).  
*Or.* 124, 20: Ðær was ungemetlic wæl geslagen Persa (W. § 47, g).  
*Cp.* 4, 1: Gode ælmihtegum sie ðonc ðætte we nu ænigne onstal habbað lareowa (W. § 47, g).  
*Cp.* 78. 4: Swa sceal se sacerd gitt simle ða domas beran awritene on his breostum Israhela bearna.

For numerous other instances, see Wülfing, §§ 3, b, d, h; 4, g; 6, d; 44, 2; 46, 4, a; 46, c; and especially 50 g, h, i. I have incidentally noted one in Wulfstan: And we gelyfað þæt ærist sy on domesdæge ealra manna (*Homilien*, Napier, 1883, III, p. 24, 18).

The idiom is still apparently in full vigor in Shakespeare's time. I note (without an exhaustive search) the following instances:—

- Rom. & Jul.* III. i. 152:  
O, the blood is spilt  
Of my dear kinsman!  
*Meas. for Meas.* I. i. 60:  
To the hopeful execution do I leave you  
Of your commissions.

*Meas. for Meas.* I. ii. 152:

Save that we do the denunciation lack  
Of outward order.

*Othello* I. iii. 90:

I will a round unvarnish'd tale deliver  
Of my whole course of love.

*King Lear* IV. vii. 16:

The untun'd and jarring senses, O, wind up  
Of this child-changed father!

*Macbeth* II. iii. 137:

Against the undivulg'd pretence I fight  
Of treasonous malice.

*Cymb.* II. i. 65:

More hateful than the foul expulsion is  
Of thy dear husband!

*Wint. Tale* II. i. 156:

There's not a grain of it the face to sweeten  
Of the whole dungy earth.

Cf. also *Twelfth N.* V. i. 392, *Jul. Caes.* II. i. 196, II. iv. 34, *Othel.* III. iii. 259, *Cymb.* IV. ii. 196, V. iii. 45, *Wint. Tale* III. ii. 128, IV. i. 6. Cf. also Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*:

What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape  
Of deities or mortals, or of both?

The frequency of this idiomatic word-order in and before Shakespeare assists, I believe, in corroborating Theobald's emendation of *habits devil* to *habits evil* in *Hamlet* III. iv. 162. It may be noted, first, that Q<sub>2</sub> prints no comma after *eate*.<sup>2</sup> This would make the clause *who all sense doth eat Of habits [d]evil* identical in word-order, and in nearly all cases in verse-form, with the instances cited.

The structure of the whole passage confirms this idiomatic reading of the clause. In the emended text we find Shakespeare's usual clear coherence,—here, as so often, indicated by balance and contrast:—*monster* : *angel*; *habits evil*: *use of actions fair and good*; *who all sense doth eat*: *likewise gives a frock or livery that aptly is put on*. The text reading not only destroys the balance in this last instance,—which, be it noted, contains Hamlet's chief point,—but it involves an absolute contradiction. Taken by itself, the clause *who all sense doth eat* would mean, 'who gradually dulls all sensitiveness' (to good as well as to evil). The rest of the passage then develops the contrary idea

that custom gradually sharpens our sensitiveness to good, so that it issues in good habits. The emended text, on the other hand, presents the idea as the whole context obviously demands; namely, that custom, which dulls our sensitiveness to the evil of bad actions,<sup>3</sup> likewise sharpens our sensitiveness to the good in good actions.

Moreover, I venture the opinion, which is perhaps not susceptible of proof, that the rhythmic quality of the passage is greatly improved by reading according to the punctuation in Q<sub>2</sub>, and according to the natural structure of the extremely common metrical phrase group to which I have called attention.

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## THE EXEMPLUM IN ENGLAND

*The Exemplum in the early religious and didactic Literature of England*, by JOSEPH ALBERT MOSHER. New York: The Columbia University Press, 1911. 8vo. xi, 150 pp.

It is surprising that the field of medieval Latin fiction has been so neglected by American scholars. A few *motifs* in ballad, story and fable have been traced to their medieval Latin analogues; but nothing has been done in the literary history of the subject or in the editing of texts. Such works as the *Disciplina Clericalis* have, until recently, been almost inaccessible to scholars, owing to the rarity of the printed editions. It is only since the publication of Mr. Herbert's *Catalogue of Romances in the Department of MSS. in the British Museum*, London, 1910, that American scholars could form an idea of the enormous extent and varied interest of a part of the field. The great repositories of *exempla* remain unpublished and a judicious selection would have been of great value and interest. One, not very satisfactory, has just been made by a German scholar, while

<sup>2</sup> Rolfe (*Hamlet*, revised ed., N. Y., 1906, p. 278), who explains the text as it stands, is obliged to assume the idea contained only in the emended text; explaining of *habits devil* as "the evil genius of our habits (that is, bad ones)."

<sup>3</sup> The passage is not found in the First Quarto and the Folio.